Christmas Eve 2013

Drysdale Uniting Church

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Lectionary: Matthew 1: 18-23

Luke 2: 1-14

John 1: 1-5, 14

To understand the story of Christmas it is necessary to understand that in the 1st century the people of Jewish faith had waited patiently for hundreds of years, for a Messiah: a ‘king of Kings’; a ‘Lord of lords.

A descendent of mighty King David, whom God would send to lead them and re- establish the power and might of the nation.

The hymn *O come Emmanuel* gives us some idea of that waiting and longing.

Hymn: *O come Emmanuel*

Following the death of Jesus, his followers told and re- told

stories of his life. (‘Remember when Jesus said …’, ‘And remember when he …..’, ‘And that time in ….’)

But with the passing of the years the eye-witnesses died.

So Christians began to write down what was remembered of him.

Some of those writings we call ‘the *gospels’*

The first to be written, the oldest was the one attributed to Mark. It is a fast moving account, beginning with John the Baptist introducing Jesus and ending with an account of Jesus’ death. (Resurrection stories were added later)

But, among the followers of Jesus, and outside their group,

there soon arose questions and debate:

# Was Jesus a man? or divine? or both?

# What was his place (if any) in Judaism?

# Was he the long awaited Messiah?

So in the next gospel to be written (we call it *Matthew*) some of these matters are addressed.

Matthew 1: 18 – 23

The writer also includes a long genealogy linking Jesus to the bloodline of King David and Abraham. Also, he introduces the story of the virgin birth which marks Jesus as *different* to all other men/ women.

The claim of the followers of Jesus (recorded by Matthew) was clear: Jesus ***was*** the long awaited ‘Messiah’

The next gospel to be written we call ‘*Luke’*

The author reinforces the belief that Jesus was the messiah.

He mentions Bethlehem’

long associated with King David, from whom the messiah would descend.

Luke 2: 1- 14

Carol: *Away in a manger* (one of the sentimental favourites)

In time, the followers of Jesus moved on from simply *telling* stories of Jesus to a *theological reflection* upon them: [ to an explanation of the *meaning* of the stories]

The last gospel to be written is attributed to John and demonstrates this.

Listen to his ‘Christmas’ story; and note that there is no Bethlehem, no heavenly choir and no virgin in a stable.

John 1:1- 5, 14

The message is clear:

Speak of Jesus, and you speak of God, for in Jesus, God had drawn near: *‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’*

The hymn writers of Christendom have taken up this truth

in the songs we often sing on Christmas morning:

*‘Joy to the world!*

*The Lord is come*

*Let earth receive its king’*

*‘Love came down at Christmas …*

*Love incarnate ….’*

Carol: *O little town of Bethlehem*

The message of Christianity is clear: the waiting and the longing of first century Judaism is over, for God had drawn near.

And therein lay the challenge of Christianity: to recognise the truth that *God has drawn near*. God is available. God is approachable. (In spiritual terms) God is nearby.

Let us pray

Eternal, mighty, divine Spirit: there have been times of *longing* within us, times when we *cannot*  feel your presence; times when we *could not care less*.

And then we remember, that in Jesus, the Christ, You *have* drawn near ---- and for that we are thankful.

We remember that your embrace is wider than our wandering ---- and for that we are thankful.

We remember that the spirit of love, of truth, of forgiveness, of compassion, and all that enhances life *is nearby*, at hand, that we might reach out and receive. And we give thanks for that. Amen.

Tonight, we remember the birth of Jesus, the man of Nazareth ----the Divine One ---- and we offer our praise and thanksgiving.

We hear the testimony of the gospels, and we offer praise and thanksgiving: in the name of the holy One, Jesus Christ. Amen

Let me tell you a Christmas story, or at least give you a summary of a story called *The Other Wise Man.\**

It was first told by Henry van Dyke, many years ago.

With his companions, this Eastern scholar had studied the sky and all in it and also the Hebrew scriptures brought to his nation many years before by the Jews deported there in defeat. They concluded that a *‘king of kings’* was to be born in the West: in Jerusalem.

As this ‘wise man’ reached the outskirts of Babylon he came upon a dying Jew. He turned aside (like a good Samaritan) to assist and stayed with the man all night.

They talked and in gratitude the man told him that the child he sought would not be born in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem.

The delay caused the wise man to miss the meeting with his three friends. To follow them across the desert alone required that he purchase camels and other provisions. This he did and paid for them with one of the four precious jewels that he carried as gift for the babe, the king to be born.

By the time he reached Bethlehem the holy family, and his three friends had moved on. But he found himself plunged into a crisis because by order of king Herod all infants were being slaughtered. Inside the house where he stood a young mother was attempting to hide her infant. Soldiers approached and the wise man offered the second of his gifts to their captain saying, ‘Take the jewel and spare the child’ The soldier did so and they moved on.

That wise man wandered the rest of his life searching for the babe of Bethlehem. In the course of that wandering he helped many using the third of his jewels to pay for the

shelter, the medication, the food and the clothing he gave to many in need along the way.

For thirty- three years he wandered, and aged, about to die he found himself in Jerusalem. It was crowded, as many pilgrims had come to celebrate the Passover festival.

There was great agitation in the streets for the one Pilate called *‘King of the Jews’* was about to be crucified.

He was swept along with the crowd, wondering, ‘Could this ‘king’ be the babe I have searched the world for?’ The crowd moved on heading for the place of execution.

Suddenly, from behind him, soldiers were dragging down the street a girl about to be sold as a slave to pay for her father’s debts. She appealed to the old man and he used his last jewel to purchase her freedom.

Just then the earth trembled, and a tile loosened from the roof above fell and struck a mortal blow. About to die, he quietly lamented that he had never found the babe/ the king of kings and that he had spent his intended gifts on other things.

As he lay in the street the girl cradled his head in her lap and heard him murmur, ‘But lord when did I see thee hungry and feed thee or thirsty and give you drink; naked clothe thee or a stranger and give thee shelter?’

And then she heard a voice as if carried on the wind:

‘In-as-much as you did it to even the least man or woman, you have done it unto me’

The old, wise man knew in that moment that although he had not made it to Bethlehem on time the One whom he sought had been his companion along the way, throughout his life.

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You and I did not make it to Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, but be assured: *God has drawn near.*

And we can be part of the continuing story.

Praise be to God.

* The story of the Other Wise Man. Henry van Dyke. Harper & Brothers Publishers London and New York 1930